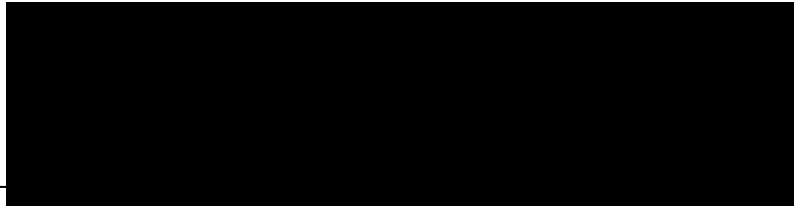


Nightlight

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ABSTRACT

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This is an anthology of poems written from 2016 to 2020 mapping my journey through college. These poems are either murals or manifestations of things that exceeded their stay in my head. The words are poets, artists, teachers, friends, and family possessing my hand and speaking in my voice. My poetry is how I process the world. Some people talk their thoughts out loud and others beat punching bags to satisfy a primal urge for release. I write poems.

The goal of this anthology is to communicate identities. Ones that may be familiar and others that may be less so. It spans identities of thought, ideology, relationships, spirituality, and personal development. This collection is like Dumbledore's Pensieve—this is to say that other than their source, these poems share very little with each other. They lack continuity of form but not necessarily of meaning. In their own ways, each is true, in both content and medium, to my worldview. Some poems articulate ideas best on the page—in Times New Roman and center aligned. Others naturally take on shapes. Some poems float off of the page entirely and onto stages. Not because they are any more important but are in a way special. They need to be nurtured and molded by performance before I can give them away.

Some poems whisper and others whine, but never when they aren't supposed to. Everything here is intentional. This is my Nightlight. May it keep away your monsters too.

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Acknowledgments

POETIC STATEMENT

I always loved stories. I loved reading them, watching them, hearing them, and seeing them. Lucky for me, I was always surrounded by great storytellers. I was blessed with living rooms full of characters and bedtime stories with more drama than HBO. All my first plays, performances, and poetry were written, choreographed, and curated by the women I get to call family. Any inspiration to pick up a pen comes from them. It comes in the wee hours of the morning watching my aunt reenact family dinners with props she finds around the house and listening to my grandmother tell stories in Sindhi of the India-Pakistan partition and new beginnings. These are the moments when I learned to laugh and cry, and it was from these stories I became who I was becoming. After Oscar Wilde said, “life imitates art,” I understood that what I experienced all those nights could be summarized in three letters: art. Those stories made me feel life so viscerally that I devoted my life to storytelling.

My mother’s, aunt’s, and grandmother’s stories began my canon, but I was hungry. My first poets were Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss, and most other poetry I was exposed to in my early childhood was through Hindi music. There is a vocal butter to the way Hindi flows when spoken. Rap in Hindi sounds terrible. The inflections of the language don’t lend themselves well to syncopation. But to express love, longing, or pain, there have never been better melodies than in Hindi songs. Holding Hindi in conversation with the English in Rap and Hip-Hop, the main genres of music I listened to growing up, taught me how to flavor language. There is a satisfaction to rhyme. Assonance and consonance *taste* good. These ideas about musicality inform my writing process just as much as the end result. “*After Shakira*” is the best example of these two very different genres of music coming together in my writing. I love dancing, but only because I love the music I am dancing to. “*After Shakira*” was written as a dance. It’s a poem

about throwing ass for ass throwers to throw ass to. Every line of that piece is a meditation on rhyme and rhythm and recreating those sounds that make me want to move—and thus make me want to write. I want someone to be able to do more than just see my writing. I want them to hear it, to taste it, to feel it. There is a special kind of illusion that happens when something ensnares all the senses, it becomes a reality. For however long the magic lasts, there is nothing else. I have been hypnotized by this feeling so many times, and it's something worth fighting for. There is a release in giving into that trance.

The ability to articulate myself emotionally, physically, and spiritually is fueled by the art I consume. Dr. Seuss and Playboy Carti taught me how to rhyme. They showed me how to make words valuable before they made sense. They inspired my writing as much as my performance style. Shel Silverstein, Harry Baker, and Anis Mojgani taught me how to enjoy language. They stretch words into shapes and turn math into poetry. They taught me how to enjoy myself and inspired me to write poems like “Bollywood Boys,” “Bizarre Trees,” and “*After Shakira*.” A\$AP Rocky, Schoolboy Q, and Sylvia Plath showed me the edges of emotion. They gave language to circumstances far darker than I hope I ever experience. They inspired poems like “*Actractaspididae*,” “Dear Skeleton Princess” (based off of Plath’s poem “Daddy”), and “Sirens’ Nocturne.” These artists developed my palate for art. My taste for fantasy and science fiction is equal parts Ramayan, Mahabharata, Eoin Colfer, and Jonathan Stroud. This is why so many of my poems speak through images of space (“Crop Circles” and “Like Bhai”), mythology (“Pyramids”), and kingdoms (“would I be a good king?” and “Why Would I Be a Good King?”). My spirituality is equal parts Hinduism and *The Giving Tree*. Because of my cultural background, so many of my poems take on mystical elements like “Call and Answer,” “Zodiac,” and “Yajna.” After living in Spain for six weeks and traveling on my own for the first time, I fell

in love with architecture and nature—a very different kind of art than any written form. This informed poems such as “La Arnia,” “Mistwalking in Portland, Oregon,” “Sun Reminds Us,” and “Star-Crossed Beams.” The list goes on, but the point is that my work is molded by many more hands than my own.

I played flute in an ensemble for seven years and in a marching band for four. This is why so many of my poems, specifically the spoken ones, focus on musicality. Either directly such as in poems like “Sirens’ Nocturne” or in its rhyme and rhythm like in “Pointers.” But even before I picked up the flute, I had an inflatable green guitar, and this green guitar let me captivate audiences as far as the Greater Houston Area. My parent’s living room was a packed venue for my performances. What I mean to say is that as far back as I can remember, I loved to perform. Whether the audience wanted to be there or eat their dinner in peace, I was going to put on a show. From sixth grade to twelfth grade my shows changed from balloon guitar performances to flute solos. Then in college, I found a way to combine writing and performance to fill the void left behind by band. I was watching poets like Harry Baker, Malcolm Wicks, and Anis Mojgani perform for audiences of all sizes. These performances happened in coffee shops, stadiums, bars, and even in the middle of the street. I was so taken aback by not only the versatility of the craft but also its appeal. People would snap, laugh, scream, and cheer for these people *as* they were speaking. All library etiquette had gone out of the window, and there was something exciting about breaking these rules. People were getting excited about poetry, and I felt less weird for being excited about it too.

After two years at the University of Texas, I finally mustered up the courage to try out for our competitive poetry slam team. I wrote three performance poems that I am far too embarrassed by to include in this anthology, but for whatever reason, they spoke to my audience.

I performed for the first time at an open mic to compete for a spot on a poetry team of five, and I came out with second place. As part of the official 2019 University of Texas Poetry Slam Team, I went on to compete at the national College Union Poetry Slam Invitational with the two performances I included in the “SPOKEN” section of this anthology. That year, our team placed 7th out of 58 universities across the country, and for the first time in five years, a Longhorn poet brought a CUPSI award back to the 40 acres. My poem *Bollywood Boys* earned the title of “Gut-Buster Funny Poem,” and for the first time in my life, I had paper evidence proving that I am in fact funny.

I enjoyed learning spoken word so much that I started trying my hand at any new form I could find. I took three poetry workshops, two general writing workshops, and a playwriting workshop in addition to my major requirements. While the former two writing classes stimulated my creative side for obvious reasons, my playwriting class changed my craft in the most recognizable ways. I enjoyed playwriting more than most classes I’ve taken at the University of Texas. I came in hoping to gain an appreciation for theatre, and I am leaving with much more than that. After taking this class, I started putting stage directions in my poems, and the question, “how would this look on stage?” is something I ask myself whenever I’m watching, listening, or reading anything. The last line of “Give a Toast” didn’t exist before my playwriting class. Initially, the poem was a reflection on the ritual of drinking. It was a poem *about* giving toasts. Then playwriting came along, and I started to think of the poem as a character. I asked myself why I was describing a toast when I could get my point across better by making my poem the character of its own play. This is why the last line is now a stage direction. I let the character of the toast speak for itself, and this gave the poem ethos. So many poets write about alcohol but how many drink in their poems?

I tried treating theatre like poetry at the beginning. I thought it would be easier to create an interaction between two people than to get people to understand some of the poems I write. I very quickly

learned that this wasn't the case at all. I struggled with writing a genuine conversation between two college students (as a current college student). It resulted in one of the worst pieces of writing that I've ever created. That play was terrible, but I knew it was terrible and still turned it in. I let it be terrible. In my other classes, we were always asked to write in ways I was already comfortable with. After writing enough persuasive essays, short stories, and poems, I could be at least somewhat confident that what I was bringing to class I could be proud of sharing. The first play I turned into my playwriting class was a catastrophe, but it was the first time I've ever been really afraid to share something I'd written. Now, I see it as one of the most productive things I've ever done for myself. It made me step back to the drawing board. Getting feedback from that play was a wakeup call to rethink how I approach the page. I tried to start thinking in terms of character. I couldn't just use my words to create setting, so I became a stage designer. If people in the kitchen are having a conversation, what are the people on the couch doing to pass the time? How can I play with the audience? Can I make this abstract idea into a character and to what degree can I create a place that is completely new yet eerily familiar? These are questions that poems have never asked of me, but now my plays do.

Two particular plays from that class, *The Flick* and *Everybody*, inspired different approaches to storytelling. The creativity of circumstance in *The Flick* made me rethink setting, and the creativity of allegory in *Everybody* made me rethink character. I tried applying these ideas in my own plays and poems, and found myself actually enjoying the experimentation process. I was using plays to write poems and vice versa. It was a match made in heaven.

Often, I feel afraid of my intrinsic tendency to be corny. I'm afraid this will come through in my writing. Especially in an environment like playwriting, I was even more critical of my work because it was still such an unfamiliar craft. First, I tried writing a story with only one setting like in *The Flick*. I wanted to see if I could squeeze out the same amount of story from such little circumstance with a play entitled *Tick-Tock* about a strained marriage between the hour hand and minute hand of a clock. Then, I tried creating allegory with my play *Bizarre Trees-the Musical*, which is directly based off of the poem later in this anthology entitled "Bizarre Trees." I wanted to keep the general mood of *Everybody* with its

sometimes fruitless attempt and making ideas like death seem lighthearted. But I wanted both mood and meaning for my play. I wanted depth thinly veiled by humor. Whether these intentions manifested in my plays or not, the process of building a house with these unfamiliar materials taught me more about poetry than some poets.

This drive to stitch together criss-crossing identities is perhaps the most accurate way to describe my poetry. I love poetry, but it's informed by Bollywood, rap, and now plays. I'm a writer, but I'm also a computer scientist. I write in several languages—some for people and others for computers. I am a first generation Sindhi-American, and I draw from and write in both Hindi and Sindhi. I speak Spanish and had the privilege of performing a spoken word poem for an audience of Spaniards and students entirely in Spanish. I love the arts and the sciences. I am not any one of these identities, but rather a writhing mass of all of them. Whether all the combinations make for compelling art is for you to decide.

All these identities make me who I am but none really larger than the one I create through my poems. These are my most important thoughts packaged and delivered for consumption. Whether you are nourished or nauseated, these are parts of me that tugged at my mind enough to be let outside. Five years from now, I don't know whether I will be writing poetry, plays, short stories, or screenplays, but I know I will be writing. I come from a community that doesn't take art seriously. Most of my relatives are doctors or businessmen. Some are wealthier than others, but few of them seem really happy. I know that telling stories makes me happy, and if I am doing that, I have succeeded.

WRITTEN

Poets

Our margins have curves.
We pick thorns
out of words and make
petals out of letters. We
stitch broken hymns,
and hers,
and them together
with verse.

How to Understand Poetry

What
If
the
Point of
This poem
Teetered on the
Edge of a pin, just
On the verge of falling
To its death. What if it leaned?
Could not for the life of it stand up straight?
What if it swayed? What if the point
Caught wind blew away. Would
The point be that it left or that it was
Here in the first place? Or what if I lied
About the point? What's the point of a
Point anyway? What if
There's no point?
There's just a
What.

Then what?

Hearsay

She said
Don't say
I said
Say less
I didn't
I said
They heard
They said
Well said
I said
Enough said
I wrote
They read
They said
Well read
But said
Instead
Could've said
I said
Well said
I wrote
I said
I said.

Dear Skeleton Princess

Bored of dying. You brought dark
back with you. Bones glued
with flesh, crumble
to the touch,
The shards
sting when
they shatter.
There is no
choking
like—having
your pieces
keeping down
my breath.
Can you see me?
Your eyes
Seek refuge
So deeply,
How can you
Look past your
Skull?
The grave looked brightest
Before you filled it.
You left enough meat
Behind to keep the taste
In my mouth. Left
Bones to be picked
at by the vultures.

In their beaks, you flew
Away one last time.

Atractaspididae

I'd like to believe that it was unfair to Eve
To be swallowed whole,
But the Adam in me clings
too tightly to rib to crave
How did my fingers not leak
In the brush of your curls?
How did I not feel the teeth
In your ringlets?
I made an addiction out of the tease.
A habit out of the almost.
My dear, I relish the secretion.
Feed to fulfill.
Hide in the crevices.
Never let me
Find out
How good I taste.
Drink every drop of the ichor.
Sip the nectar.
Let the flesh decay.
I promise not to notice
The discoloration.
Do not tell me until
The number of breaths
Left to breathe
Is in the ones.
Leave before the countdown.
Strut don't writhe.
Feel the glow of
Having known
That you left it beating.
Trade yours for mine.
This is not a disease
of the heart.
you drip
In neurotoxins.
--yours truly, The Host.

Sirens' Nocturne

I

Imagine the force it would take
to dampen the thunder of an 808.
It would have to be holy.

But two black cocktails down,
and now you're swimming in
festering water.

Rivers are chaste,
not by choice
but by determination.

But the current is too forgiving
to clear all of its rooted pollutants—
there is nothing godly about your silence.

II

For one so afraid of the depths,
you're awfully attached to the abyss.
For one always preening her feathers,
you're awfully influenced by forked tongues.
I guess, the horns were a small sacrifice
For wings.

During the lowest of tides
it wasn't broken shells
that scared me.

It was
the awareness of
being swallowed whole,

and after five moons
I cursed the beach for taking you—
too naive to look up.

III

Without knowing the name of the wind,
you took to the skies;
flight isn't a privilege reserved for angels.

I'm realizing the ocean's melodies
were lost on deaf ears,
but there is an audience in confidence,

a round of applause in a clear conscience.
So I threw my drum to the water,
and let the sirens sing to my tempo.

I could never keep up with your snare anyway.
Fast and fickle.
More rhythm than rhyme.

IV

Some hearts beat deafeningly.
Slowly and with purpose.

Blue and Silver

Never learned how to find
silver linings in clouds...just
how to wait for them to pass.

It thunders so much here
we've become numb to the sound,
we chase lightning bolts on
the shoulders of steel playgrounds—
convince ourselves
crackling is the sound of a fireplace,
burning is the smell of the sun
kissing us to perfection.

We bottle thunder bolts in fifths,
Save them for a special occasion until
We have enough to light up the sky
One more time because we've forgotten
what blue looks like.

We started to crave it,
Even beat it into ourselves:
Not all of us make noise
And some of our bruises
Don't even show.
We frustrate our bodies by
thirsting in a rainforest.
We collect drops of our ourselves
Flooded with blue until it's all we can see.
We collect so many, we start to float—

High enough to see the clouds for ourselves only
To find out all the silver had been made into spoons.

Give a Toast

We raise spirits to toast to our all-time lows.
We pop the cork like a diving board,
They say there's a story at the
bottom of this bottle.
Swigs for any who want
To be characters, we decide
tonight's roles with dice.
It's too often that I've lost
this lottery; puked too many
alphabet soups before I finish...
The juices ferment into the morning,
The wallpaper reeks of a clean conscience.
I convince everyone the cast needed
An antagonist, and we raise more spirits
To a story well-told.

None of us is happier, but we've dug up
Enough ghosts to start a morgue.
(We drink)

Carpel Tunnel Vision

Zombie wrists wrap keyboard scalps,
septic hands feed on and off the brain.

Lines of code and coke cans can't,
Fill the voids the maggots left for me.

Nights out are a largely human concept,
Night tends to be inside with me.

I keep it company.
Scream at it through Windows.

My fingers speak this language fluently
They drink Java and the dark is like

sweet·en·er
/'swēt(ə)nər, 'swētnər/

[Learn to pronounce](#)

noun

1. a substance used to sweeten food or drink, especially one other than sugar.

Some sweet to dilute the bitter
tongues in my aching hands.

Crop Circles

I know a boy who danced in crop circles.
He wore slippers a size too big and a loose t-shirt.

He has a father who flew spaceships.
He sipped tea and bowed to taste its leaves.

He has a brother who drew crop circles.
He wore boots and a tailored shirt.

He has a mother who made spaceships.
She sipped coffee and raised the bean stew to her lips.

The boy sits across the father.
The brother sits across the mother.

They orbit dishes of fallen asteroids
Etched with alien prayers, spray

Sermons like holy interpreters.
The room, a universe of swirling gospels.

The father spews eclipses, says he's taming suns.
The mother stitches silver linings into moons.

The brothers breathe in each mantra
Until the room is a vacuum.

Like Bhai

My brother is an asteroid.
He rode a moon to moons,
He rode a planet to stars, and
He crashed through the ceiling on his birthday.
He saw charcoal and held it like stardust.
He put dust into orbit and trash became a galaxy.

She asked me, “would you do this for me?”
I slammed a wormhole in her face.
I ride from Earth to the Moon,
Everyone reminds me how short of a journey it is
“Should’ve gone to the stars.”

My body is a green moon
Each crater like lime juice;
I suck the sour out of my wounds;
When I cut my fists on glass
I found blood where there were mirrors
And stardust in my fists that tasted like lime.

Quickdraw

Six of them and seven more coming,
Luck follows whose holster is
Slicked with a nervous palm.
Fingers asleep at the trigger set
off rude alarms in this town.
Boots mount beasts for twice
As many shoes, hit the ground running.
The same way they'll be leaving.
Seven there and six more coming,
the only one staying for the credits
was thirteenth and only because he
forgot his spurs at home.

Pointers

There are men who wield God-
given five-digit weapons,

with unparalleled accuracy.
Hip-fired hollow-points or
Full-metal iron-sight finger-
fired points. The shots always land.

They rain blame in place of bullets,
phantom pains in armor-piercing guilt,

Magazines in the wrists,
Foregrips in the elbows,
Friend or foe, we are all painted in targets.

Until the stock creaks and the muzzle buckles
and the rust sets into the calcium mechanism,

The men with the God-given five-digit weapons
don't realize that a triple-barrel always pointed home.

Limeade

When life gives you lemons,
trade them for limes.
Tell life that *this* star
shines in the limelight;
doesn't hide in the lemonshade.
Lemonade is too sweet a drink
for life's sour plots and green screens,
so the next time life gives you lemons
tell life you want limes instead.

Yajna

Fresh milk, rice,
and sweet ghee
drip from
Krishna's fingers
as he hid from the gopis
perfume the room with
the scent of the stars
and the planets.
The smell will
remind you that
this is no ordinary fire.
This is the yajna
The dance of
Kali, the demon slayer
each flaming tendril licking
life out of the air
as she drinks wood
and slowly,
exhales
the way a flutist breathes
himself into silver.

Call and Answer

Speaking,
The realization comes that I only speak
when I am spoken to, I am
looking for something, but
I've been too loud since
I replaced our holy babble
with tongue.

Listening,
Ask myself questions,
remind me that lightning never
strikes the same spot twice, but the carpet always crackles
when we trip over the peeling patch next to the door.
The kettle whistles steam in praise
of the lightning kissing our heels.

Fire

The Sun needs no reminder to keep burning
As we approach, rush to raise the drawbridge.
battering ram just visible above the horizon,
the Earth beneath and our enemies ahead
tremble, Mars sent us in his stead.

Her majesty's eyes kiss flame unfazed
If lioness wants, lioness needs, lioness gets,
Sun need not remind daughter to keep burning
Her roar too loud to hide between mane, and
Even if they tried to compete, she wasn't listening.

Carnage of the frontline, a lone archer
String drawn, no arrow pierced farther,
The truth of his shot second only to his tongue
his quiver would empty before his worth,
a Sun needs no reminder to keep burning.

Air

Two sophists giggled between quips
Twin minds, too full of everything for anything
Else, One of arts, one of philosophy
to adapt isn't choice, it's policy
Winds and wit waltz in the breeze of a whirlwind.

Head of the table, balance in the beam,
Calmer before the storm than during
Winds and wit give to clear skies
Dipping in and out of diplomacy
Howling to the moon instead of hunting.

Winds and wit turn to tempests
Breath saturated with intent churns waves
He speaks winds that resemble hurricanes
Form is his freedom he waxes and wanes
Into oblivion he moonlights as savior.

Water

Less broth brewed and more envy bubbled in the ship's canteen
day by day Chef cooks with less spice and more sting
ambitious alchemy in writhing pots and dreams
why paddle shallow waters when in sinful depths sirens sing?
captain's mortality is tugging at seams

A doctor's life pursued to ease others' bleeding pains
bleeds irony when the cleric is prone to the brain
angelfish daughter of romance, she swam best in schools
paddles shallow waters when others risk deeper pools.
this shy chantey laments a mind fermenting in pain.

At the helm, aquanaut slices sea with his ship like claws
Willing waves come easy to who can twist others to their cause
his resolve salted by brine, his wishes hardened to a shell
he forgot how to paddle shallow waters, finds home in deeper swells.
but stone turns to sand, even Neptune's children tire of his laws.

Earth

Peaks crumbled to pebbles under his pickaxe,
bull-headed brute, rubies were his matador's muletas.
Day after day steel will shattered stone hearts,
but even metal is made malleable through hearth.
He seeks jewels but finds Earth's treasure elsewhere.

She, perfectionist, polishes his dull to brilliance
Scraping away each grain, crass gives way to candescence.
"to birth beauty is to make thy self less ugly," she chants.
maiden for all except him, who corrupted with a glance.
She milks gem from stone but knows Earth's treasure.

Her treasure is father's greatest disappointment
princess powerless without his crown behind it.
He'd cover his eyes with coins before their purse.
Baphomet picks out rubies for his son-in-law's hearse.
He craves crystals when she is all of Earth's treasure.

would I be a good king?

This poem is not a child of time:
it is the father with his hand on the
small of his son's back, and
the bicycle which must wobble before
it glides; the king is the son,
both pushed and taken, yet
keeps his fists squarely on the handlebars;
this poem the oar and time the water,
the king is the oarsman answering to
a thousand voyagers.
The king looks over the side of his boat,
sees his people blossom only to wilt,
he still does not row against the current.
I would not be a good king.

Why Would I Be a Good King?

There is a king now,
And his is the throne, and his is yours
And you are yours, and they are you,
And they are good, so you are good,
But my king why are you good?
Because they are me,
And they are for me,
And they are of me,
And I am of them,
And they are good,
But why are they good?
Because they are me,
And I am good because
I am yours. I am of you. I am for you.

Vine Patch

Do trimmer blades
Understand “patches?”

Do hairs scream
As they are beheaded?

Or do they sing to the
Buzz of these steel bees?

Do tender fingers listen
To the mane’s choir?

Will this choir bless your fingers
With their voices at all?

Do you wish there were fewer
Voices, fewer ensembles?

Did you wish your talons found
Fewer vines?

Did you know I wished
For more singers, more twists?

How can I explain how it feels to
Feel you before you touch me?

Pyramids

If this is written in stone, let
Me break rock with fist, crush
Up character, crumble ink,
Handrail these lines up and down
Steps, rub what's left of the
Monolith between gum and enamel, numb
Tooth, smooth edges, prune
The hieroglyphs, this
Time I write it in pencil.

Read Receipts

What contest did I win
To earn these trophies?
I stack them against
the wall, and watch for
Wandering eyes, answers-in-
waiting for questions. I can't
help but say I enjoyed the game.

Bad sports lose twice. I don't
Know what contest I won to earn
These trophies, but I'll say
I'm lucky to be playing. I'd
Feel luckier if I knew what contest
gives out trophies like these, but we
don't talk about it much; silence is
Golden, and all I can see are medals.

Toast to Wasted Time

If talk was like
Clockwork, we would count
The seconds between the
Minute our
Hands meet each hour.
But talk is like
Timer, setting deadlines,
counting seconds
between ignoring alarms and
Pushing snooze between blankets.
And if hate is like
Wasted time, we should've
Saved ours, Our hands
Would've saved space
For the faces we
Made look like ours.

La Arnia

There is a beach in the north of Spain: A stone-
cradle, oasis, cupped hands,
no intentions,
“come as you are.”
the water is a smeared
palette, a rushed stroke,
clumsy hand, clever artist let
forest to bleed into sky, no lines
where life thrives so lively it is silent

there’s the rock frosted with green,
the only defense here from blue,

from the waves who whisper through cupped hands
nautical things they’ve brought from beyond the rock.

Star-Crossed Beams

Trace jawline
as if it were flushed metal,
smile if you're met with
warmth and rusty whiskers,
let reach into gilded curls
let polish the gold beneath.
Hold me close and now we're
star-crossed beams,
aching for sky.

You were forged of
Silver and gold,
I was cast in
nickel, grime
we crossed paths
somewhere in between,
and became star-crossed beams,
metal things wishing for height,

but
Eiffel Tower
is only to be seen,
Now you are a star
amongst crossbeams,
and it is a privilege to
look up and see you smile.

Mistwalking in Portland, Oregon

Lungs in the stoplights:
a sigh of relief in green,
a gasp in yellow, a held
breath in red. Music is suspended
in the skyline, breathed at intersections
through clouds just as high as the signs.

Like signs, people here don't say much.
They speak through filters,
Lenses, and canvas bags,
Aim lenses, red lights, and
Flash sirens.

I forget that mist is also
Blinding and white and
remember what it's like to
Dance between the lanes of a
Two-way street, a place far away
From lights and signs and even if
There's one nearby,
It's too loud out here to read anyway.

Sun Reminds Us

If I craned my neck and squinted it was
To thank light for color.
If they craned their necks and squinted
It was to remind us of ours—

The Sun here reminds us:
To be brown and on this beach,
is to be coal in fire, but what makes us
does not burn easily. When we hold it close,
we are fireproof.

Melanin must be the seagulls;
Pepper in blue soup and yellow yolk,
Flavoring the horizon like the sky is their breakfast
while the sun is trying to show them how golden
brown is.

Melanin must be the crabs;
underneath a glass ocean bearing the weight of
a thousand leagues of a thousand years of
bearing weights of breaking glass ceilings.

There are stars here, but we do not glow
Enough, or too much,
They are not looking for us, so
we search for warmth in shade.

I am a protractor
Bending backwards
How ever many degrees
It takes to squeeze every
Lecture for what I paid for it.

Problem #1:
Calculate the volume of this rectangular prism.
I worry so much about how much to put in
I forget how to think outside of it.

I study my angles and
I'm shaping up to be quite the actor.
There are no lights nor cameras but
these people record every word and
I know which ones they're looking for.

Problem #2:
Find the perimeter of this square.
I plot grids, crop yards, square feet,
Calculate to a tee how much fence
It takes to keep in profits but
Can't force a flower out of the garden.

I speak diamonds.
I pressure cook gems, the words are VVS,
I develop an acute sense for the right angles.
See, I studied circles around subjects
Just to fill circles with lead and never once
Figured out how to do anything in 3-dimensions.

Problem #3:
Find the slope of this curve.
I make points by drawing graphs;
I become a Texas Instrument
To coordinate planes.

Awara

Was a man who follows trails of vapor whispers,
guides these ghostly compasses, reads smoke and
mirrors, prefers the pitter-patter of blurry rain,
sways to the rhythm of stumbling drums, rubs
prescription lamps, wishes upon Upjohn genies to forget;
is a man who remembers only blank
smiles in crowns of grass, asks only to accompany
never for directions, presses musings onto
pages, phases into sunrises and out of sunsets,
ties the wind to twisted umbrellas, and lets himself be taken;
will be a man who
leads the parades of birds, words
bend and fold into cursive monuments, and he claims and
climbs them and reaps the seeds of his travels.

If there were people, there was person,
If there were stirrings, there was this one,
If there were moments, this was several,
If there was music, it was Bollywood,
If there was a beat, it skipped,
If there was a laugh track, it replayed,
If there was an audience, there was confusion,
If there was a cast, they forgot the lines,
If there was motion, it was slow,
If there was a director, they were pissed,
If there were writers, they shouldn't have,
If they were poets, they did anyway.

But really there was just you,
And there was me,
In English 1 Pre-AP.

Catnip

She didn't speak, she purred her mouth stripped music out of stale rooms,
Mixed, mastered, and enchanted it by breathing, her voice laced with
Synthesizers.

She speaks every and no language and I bury myself in every incantation
Claw for each syllable, I hold my paws up, try to catch every stray
Syncopation.

She fills every open space with potions she brews in bass drums,
All she asks is afterwards, the cauldron and tempo
are taken care of.

I'm tangled in the phrases but still can't keep my paws in place.
She never teaches the steps, she assumes someone will get the gist
if they're listening.

Opinions

Thought my
chest a
matchbox,
Every time
I open
my mouth,
Thought alve-
oli strikers light
My breath,
Thought my
tongue a gas
stove.

But sputtered
only fumes, I
Clogged the
whole chimney
Sweeping tar
under rugs,
now I'm
Coughing
each up
one by one.

Death by Chewing

News reels like fruit roll-ups,
Tasted them so many times
They left behind tattoos.

Burrowed through bags
Of them like moles do,
Looking for warmth underground
For so long we forgot
To breathe and drowned.

Our toxicology reports included:
Strawberry blush news anchors,
Burberry lapels, fountain
pen leaks, and whistle-
blown raspberries.

and again.

In the beginning,
a silkworm spun resurrections:
it spit thread, spilled
fibers that stitched bodies, spit
nerves, spit veins, spit copper, spit
wires, flipped switches, Strummed
strings, spit bar, spit
measure, it spit fire.
laid siege to empty villages,
took nothing, gave Earth, gave
trees, gave fruit, gave blueberry,
gave feeling, spit rhyme, spun
resurrections

and again.
A seamstress weaved resurrections:
weaved ends to
ends, weaved loops, weaved trapeze, weaved
nerves, weaved veins, weaved feet to
woven beats, weaved beat to stolen
flame, weaved flame to woven page, juggled
words until they fell away, then weaved
resurrections

and again.
We lived resurrections:
lived as us, lived as them, lived as
it, lived as friend, lived instead of
living there, and lived in spite of being
dead, we lived in place of living, we lived with
and without anything to live for, then lived
again

SPOKEN

Bollywood Boys

Picture this:

Shah Rukh Khan,
Bollywood superstar extraordinaire,
on a sand dune and
Deepika Padukone
in this bomb-ass flowy dress
she's there too, and
there's a citar and
a tabla and
a flute, and
Shreya Goshal is singing in the back,
but it's Deepika's lips that move.
And just a second ago they weren't in Peru.
But that's what love is like right?
One second you're in Mumbai, and
the music starts playing, and
then you look into her eyes, and
then you're...like...in Peru?

From your expression, I can tell
nothing I just said
sounds like love to you.
See when our hearts beat once,
theirs beats ten times two.
Bruno Mars would "catch a grenade for you" or
"jump in front of a train for you."
Ranveer Singh,
would catch the grenade,
hijack the train, and
ride it into a government
building for you.
See, us Bollywood boys
were raised on fantasies,
too detached from reality
for reality TV,
and for 50% off every Tuesday,
Our mamas took us
to watch our Desi dreams on screen.

Hands folded over nachos in prayer,
knees bent against fabric in reverence,
tonight our gods take up a new mask,
and we can take comfort in that
the only villain that ever wins in this movie theatre
is the aunty saving seventeen seats
for her extended family in the back.
I dare you to tell me that
This isn't a religious experience.

As I leave my temple,
who's gonna tell me
I can't flip a car with
the flick of a wrist?
I lift a pinky
And watch the whole army
your papa hired
to get rid of me
perish. Someone tell Achilles
that this Desi dog doesn't heel.
A hero, has no weakness...

Except his heroine,
and mine sat next to me at every
Drive-In, Dollar theatre, AMC, and chai stand.
If there was a TV
then there was my mama,
and I couldn't be left alone at home yet,
so I got to plus one.

There was a time when my week started and ended on Tuesday.
When I looked forward to my Tuesday friends,
around the time I started caring about looking my Tuesday best,
hoped this girl who always sat two rows in front of us
would one day notice my weekly Tuesday flex.

I dealt in smuggling fanta cans in my jacket,
marching through the ropes alongside my captain
who smelled like the samosas
tucked away in her handbag, and
together we ran the most successful
mother-son cartel since Dhoom Again.

Now picture this:
Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika end up stuck in Peru,
because Shah Rukh ended the song a line too soon,
and if the chorus isn't finished,
they're not going home, so
they end up staying.
The hero and his heroine
on cloud nine
with ten different excuses
why her smile makes his world stand still;
dus bahane karke le gaye dil. But
they spent so long in the sky
they forgot about the shooting stars
that got them there, their
Taare Zameen Par watching
over them from below,
their Sridevis sitting at their windows
waiting for their raja betas to call and

say her four favorite words,
“Mama, I’m coming home.”

Performance:

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Bizarre Trees

Listen,

The two of us are from a bizarre forest
Full of bizarre trees
That all grew from bizarre seeds.

Floating Oak pollen that decided
There was more to life than Oak trees,
Maybe fell in love

With the curves in Maple leaves.
See, these seeds didn't mind being bizarre
Because bizarre just looks like you and me,

And in this forest there is a clearing.
Where we plant *our* bizarre tree,
The only tree brave enough to say

"Fuck you, from today we rule this grass patch
as the King and the Queen!"
Ours will be the first to commit treason.

And it would change its colors to match our seasons
Every three months bloom a thousand more
Frost-bitten, sunkissed reasons for you to put up with me,

Because ours would be a hopeful tree.
Bough arms outstretched,
Blue buds down to the cuff,

Our tree is no stranger to the birds and the bees.

Its goal is to touch the brightest fruit in the world.
It does not know if it will ever get there,
But it keeps growing anyway,

Ours is an understanding tree.
It gives what it can until it can't.
It knows only enough to know it's enough,
And if our giving tree gets tired of giving,
We'll tell Shel Silverstein to fuck off

Because Giving Trees are overrated.
Bizarre seeds are never given chances,
We had to take them,

And that's why ours is a proud tree,

The first mixed seed in
Our tree families' family trees,

And let me tell you,
Our tree is teaching me things.
It taught me the color green.

One day, I tried scraping the bark clean,
But then I stepped back to admire its sleek moss sheen,
And like you, every day it grows on me.

I could never tell whether you were from or for heaven.
But if the apple doesn't fall far from the tree,
Paradise must be around here somewhere.

When my hands find shade in your hair
Think my fingers squirrels
Lost in your acorn curls.
And when you lean, lean in close.

Know here there are no
Consequences; our branches
are heavy with all kinds of forbidden fruits.

And let the others come,
the Paul Bunyans and the Johnny Appleseeds,
All the Snow Whites and their Dwarven wannabees,
Let them swing and let them reach,
And if they pick our fruit, let them eat,
And if they cut us down let them see,
All the history in our tree rings,
All the summers at the beach,
All the winters on the skis,
All the springs we squeaked,
And if our tree falls, who cares? so did we.
What's love if not falling?
What's love but a falling tree?

But I will admit,
Even I want to borrow a piece from our tree,
And use it to frame this poem in gold.
So one day when our tree grows feeble and old,
So tall our family won't even recognize their roots,
Our story will make it,
all the way to our great great grandkids.

And you know our great great grandkids
Are gonna be great because
great fruit like grapefruit
like our first date fruit
like your always perfectly early fruit

And my always running late fruit
Are all such great fruits
and these great fruits
come from really great roots
and baby if you and me were a seed

we'd make such great roots.

Performance:

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After Shakira

My hips don't lie, but
They do talk back.
Every time I've told them how to act
I forget they don't speak English,
My hips, they speak Travis,
they speak Bollywood,
Sometimes they speak Spanish.
Cuando estoy tirando el culo,
Language is never an obstacle.

You see, these hips
Have been in rotation since before my tongue
Forgot how to speak god. But my hips
They never forgot, so they translate.
They convert 808s into heartbreaks.
They turn Reggaeton into bhangra
and Hindi into Nae Naes.

Before I learned the word,
I called dancing "Decoration Time;"
I recognized the moments I spent in motion
Were those in which my life is the prettiest.
I didn't have all the steps down yet, but
I was born into this movement.

And my hips were at the forefront of this revolution
They turn my whole body into protest.
They remind my shoulders to relax,
say there is no wrong way to be
Around music, and if I get ahead of myself
My hips remind my fists not to reach too far
Keep your hands in the ride, they say,
this vehicle is in motion.

There is no direction to the way
My cheeks shake, they have no compass,
Sometimes they move like planets in orbit
Tempo is their sun, their gravity this movement,
They can't hear any of the cheering or sneers
My hips only keep an ear open for the bass drum.

Twenty-two years of life,
I never had a problem that
Didn't twerk out for me and
never caught a cold that
could keep me from throwing ass.
When they ask for some
shit with some bop in it,
Tell them not to worry

I packed it in the wagon.

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Last and most definitely not least, this collection is dedicated to Niki Rahimi for being my muse and reminding me why I write.

Biography

Sahib Jagdish Chandnani was born in Houston, Texas on January 29, 1998. He grew up in Sugar Land, Texas where he found his profession as a programmer and his passion as a poet. In 2016, he enrolled in the Departments of Computer Science and Plan II Honors at the University of Texas at Austin. As a student, he found himself walking the line between science and art. He discovered his place as a member of UT Spitshine, a performance poetry collective at University of Texas. He earned 7th place recognition at the 2019 College Union Poetry Slam Invitational as a part of the University of Texas Spitshine team and the title of “Gut-Buster Funny Poet” for his poem “Bollywood Boys.” His work appears in publications such as *Track//Four Journal*, *Apricity Magazine*, and *Hothouse Magazine*.